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SUBJECT: COMMUNIST PARTY SEIZED WITH UPCOMING PLENUM; RUMORS ABOUT SENIOR PERSONNEL CHANGES ABOUND

Reftel: Hanoi 2063

1. (SBU) Summary: In preparation for next year's Party Congress, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is currently preparing for its 13th and penultimate Plenum, during which key personnel decisions will be thrashed out based on ongoing lower-level party congresses. A number of rumors, sometimes contradictory, about possible resignations and new appointments indicate that the political horse-trading has begun in earnest. As Vietnam's political season moves forward, the GVN is likely to become increasingly inwardly focused, and perhaps less willing to take on sensitive or controversial issues. End Summary.

2. (SBU) According to several well-known journalist contacts, the Central Committee of the CPV is planning at least two more plenums to finalize policy and personnel decisions in advance of next year's 10th Party Congress, reportedly scheduled for some time in June 2006. The Party is currently conducting district-level party congresses, which will be followed by provincial-level congresses in the run-up to the first of these two plenums, planned for the end of this year. Party committees in important ministries will also conduct congresses to nominate candidates for the new Central Committee.

13th Plenum

3. (SBU) In late December, the Central Committee will reportedly convene its 13th Plenum for the current five-year interval, following the conclusion of provincial-level party congresses, in order to appoint the membership of the new Central Committee. Members will be drawn from nominees from each province, ministry and agency in accordance with guidelines established by the 12th Plenum held last July (reftel). In theory, Central Committee members must meet these guidelines' age, professional and geographic qualifications. According to official sources, the current Central Committee has stipulated that all new members must not be older than 50 years of age to allow them to serve at least two five-year terms. The new Central Committee is projected to consist of between 160 and 165 members, excluding alternates. (Note: The current Committee consists of 150 "full" members and no alternates. End note.)

4. (SBU) Le Tho Binh, head of the Legal Affairs Journal's Hanoi office, claimed that the Party hopes to "promote democracy" by this expansion of the Central Committee -- which in theory is the Party's leading institution when Party Congresses are not in session -- in anticipation of major policy debates in the coming years. Alternate membership, a personnel option that has not been used since the 6th Party Congress in 1986, may also be considered, and would give probationary opportunities to a greater number of key officials so that they are better prepared to serve the Central Committee while they are still relatively young, Binh asserted. Sharing the same observation, Nguyen Chi Dzung, former Editor-in-Chief of the National Assembly-affiliated Legislative Affairs Journal, added that alternate membership is also meant to provide replacements for "full" members who have to step down for any reason.

5. (SBU) According to official sources, the Central Committee has for the first time ever asked the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), the Party's umbrella for mass organizations, to vet current and prospective members of the new Committee. VFF President and former permanent Politburo member Pham The Duyet told the press that the VFF is expected to confirm candidates' "professional efficiency and trustworthiness," as well as their age and physical health. The other criteria considered are "the three no's" set by the Central Committee itself: "no corruption, no red tape and no wastefulness." Duyet added, however, that there would be no open discussion within the VFF of nominated candidates, as "personnel issues are critical and sensitive in nature." Instead, each member of the VFF's Presidium will forward his or her respective comments to the VFF President, who in turn will forward them to the CPV's Commission for Organization and Personnel, he explained.

Personnel Change Rumors

16. (SBU) Tran Nhung, former chief of international affairs of Quan Doi Nhan Dan (People's Army) newspaper, Binh and Dzung shared their common belief with Poloffs that any final decisions concerning top leadership will not be available until the 14th Plenum, expected to be the last and most important meeting before the Party Congress. All final decisions on the Party's platform, agenda and personnel decisions will be made at the 14th Plenum. Nevertheless, they report rumors that, "for the sake of continuity and stability," Nong Duc Manh will apparently stay on for another five-year term as Party Secretary, despite the fact that he is "not considered particularly capable." It is also thought that Vietnam's other three top leaders -- President Tran Duc Luong, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An -- will step down. Phan Dien, a current Politburo member and permanent member of the Central Committee's Secretariat, is also expected to step down, and is likely to be replaced by Nguyen Phu Trong, the current Party Chief in Hanoi, a Politburo member and Chief of the Central Committee's Theoretical Council. Trong is thought to be the CPV's strongest ideologue and is seen as part of the conservative faction within the current Central Committee. (Note: The Secretariat handles the Party's day-to-day affairs, which makes its 9 members powerful within Party circles. End note.)

17. (SBU) The journalists also report rumors that Politburo members Standing Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dzung and National Assembly Vice Chairman Truong Quang Duoc will continue in the new Politburo and will be named Prime Minister and Chairman of the National Assembly, respectively. Dzung has been a permanent deputy prime minister for a number of years, so replacing Khai would be seen as a "logical development." The same could be said for Vice Chairman Duoc. Other key positions in the new Central Committee, as well as the Politburo, will be clearer only after the Party congresses have been held in key provinces and cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as in important ministries such as the Ministries of Public Security and National Defense. The CPV's current Politburo reportedly recently met with key Party officials from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to discuss preparations for their municipal Party congresses because these congresses will likely decide other critical leadership positions in the CPV.

Comment

18. (SBU) Comment: With the district, provincial and ministry party congresses taking place in anticipation of the 13th Plenum, political horse-trading season is in full swing. Individual rumors notwithstanding, we will not really know who is up and who is down within the CPV until much later. We also cannot precisely predict when the Party Congress will be take place, as internal politicking and concerns about APEC events' timing are significant variables. However, we can expect that, as the preparatory political battles become more heated over the next few months, the GVN will likely become increasingly inwardly focused, and Government leaders may be less inclined to make decisions about or take positions on controversial or sensitive issues. End comment.

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